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ABSTRACT

A college English teacher, dissatisfied with the approach used in her composition classes and with its results, turned to the Outward Bound concepts of the German physician and schoolmaster, Kurt Hahn. These concepts include a belief in the value of creating adversity in order to overcome it, a belief that important things happen to people who are under stress and being challenged that are different from those met in everyday life, a belief that there are some things that cannot be taught although they can be learned, and a belief in teaching an attitude that will help people survive rather than teaching survival itself. Realizing that this philosophy is relevant to the composition classroom as well, the teacher restructured the goals of her writing assignments in light of the essential goals of the Outward Bound program: (1) self-discovery, (2) the extending of perspectives, (3) the appreciation of choices as critical to comfort, (4) the extending of problem solving abilities, and (5) a concern for others. She found that each of these goals had an application in the composition classroom and, embodied in exercises, appeared to have a beneficial effect on the growth of the student--not only as a writer but also as a person. The teacher, too, benefited from the approach. (RBW)

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The Composition Class: Outward Bound

I suppose that this paper owes its existence to an uneasiness that I have felt coming on for some time--an uneasiness that seemed to center around a need for more direction in my writing assignments. It all began with an epistemic splitting of the ways. There were two directions in which I wanted my students to move: first, toward an exploration of the phenomenological world around them, and, second, toward an exploration of their own thinking and knowing. The issue became one of how to incorporate both of these movements into my writing assignments. As so often happens, the uncovering of one problem led to others. I found myself wondering why the admonitions to "Be specific" and "Use concrete details" that had adorned my writing assignments for so long suddenly rankled now. Indeed, I found that I was beset by many of the same questions of voice, tone, style, and composition in creating a writing assignment as my students were in addressing the assignment. How could I ask them to choose a voice with care when I could not resolve my own conflict over who to sound like? Was I to be their encouraging, ever-sympathetic friend or the antagonist who bullies and badgers their best out of them? Difficult questions, these.

But while struggling one day with what it was that I did want from my writing assignments, the words <u>outward bound</u> came to mind. Not sure of anything about the phrase except that it somehow stood for the way I wanted my assignments to be, I decided to go off in pursuit of that "somehow." The results of that pursuit follow.

As near as I can determine, my first, real awareness of the term came from a conversation with a friend who was contemplating taking part in an

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Outward Bound wilderness experience. He was after some new direction in his life--a situation that seemed to parallel my own with my writing assignments. This initial awareness established, Outward Bound allusions began surfacing for me everywhere--in commercials, in Reader's Digest articles, even in the popular slang expression, "Go for it!" They all seemed to be suggesting a mystical conversion experience, sure to cure all ills. I decided that my first step would be to separate the fact from the fiction of the Outward Bound movement, and so I began by examining its history.

The outward bound concept appears to have begun with Kurt Hahn, a German physician who, first in Germany and then in Scotland, established schools whose aim was the development of the individual through the development of an attitude toward life. Athletic improvement was stressed in these schools and was achieved through a system whereby steadily increasing demands were made on the body through graduated exercises. A student could start at any level and improve by the daily execution of a number of activities. In keeping with Hahn's belief that everyone could improve, these schools were more interested in the average or poor athlete than the good one. And in keeping with Hahn's desire to develop attitude rather than just skill, new athletic techniques that might facilitate or shorten the learning experience were frequently discouraged. As Hahn told one of his teachers who wanted to introduce a new and more successful method of high jumping, "We want to develop people through jumping, not make jumpers out of people." And so when his students became known not for their intellectual achievement and physical prowess--although these were considerable--but for the gleam in their eyes, Hahn was delighted.

In 1941, with German submarines attacking British ships, it became clear that the younger sailors in both the Merchant and Royal Navy lacked the emotional and physical stamina of the older sailors and were not coping as well with the real and imagined dangers of the torpedoing. Hahn and a friend, Lawrence Holt, established the Aberdovey Sailing School to train and toughen young sailors. Several features were introduced at this time, including the name Outward Bound, that were to remain in subsequent Outward Bound schools. Among these were physical tests such as a ropes obstacle course; a cooperative "watch" composed of twelve boys who remained together for a month and shared responsibility and decision making; and community service projects, in particular, rescue work.

From this beginning, Outward Bound schools have spread throughout the world, school directors being free to shape their schools according to a personal vision, the capacities of the staff, and the opportunities offered by the particular locale. It is asked, however, that new traditions be adopted carefully, only after searching investigation to see that fundamental meanings are being kept. Among these meanings are the belief in the value of creating adversity in order to overcome it, the belief that important things happen to people under stresses and challenges different from those met in everyday life, a belief that there are some things that cannot be taught although they can be learned. And, most important, there is the belief in teaching an <u>attitude</u> that will help people survive rather than teaching survival itself. More about this attitude later.

This, then, is what I learned about the outward bound spirit as it has manifested itself in wilderness schools all over the world. My next step seemed to be to examine more closely the connection that my subconscious had already made between this spirit and my writing assignments.

To do this, I decided to reconsider the goals of my writing assignments in light of the essential goals of Outward Bound: 1. self-discovery; 2. the extending of perspectives; 3. the appreciation of choices as critical to comfort, safety, survival; 4. the extending of problem-solving abilities; 5. a concern for others. Here is what I found.

The first of these goals, self-discovery, is not new to what I shall call outward bound composition theory. There is the knowledge of self that Young, Becker, and Pike find vital in order to identify the shared features and build the bridges between writer and reader. A second approach to self-discovery comes from William Coles who says that "a writer's responsibility to someone else" can "come only through his seeing that his first responsibility" is "to create himself for himself."[1] In Coles' classroom, writing assignments invite students to become conscious of the self--the literary self--that can be construed from their language. Definitions are asked for--definitions of terms, definitions of situations--and these definitions are examined "as a problem of self-location, as the way in which a writer through describing what he sees, describes himself as a see-er." Or perhaps as see-ers. For Coles illustrates the multiple selves that writing can reveal to us in the following assignment, taken from The Plural I, which comes toward the end of his course:

> You are a student at an institute of technology. Although no major is offered by the humanities division of the institute you are required to take certain humanities courses. Why is this, do you suppose? Is such a requirement desirable so far as you are concerned?[2]

The assignment goes on to discourage stock responses about "a balanced

education" and "a well-rounded man." Coles and the class, in discussing a student's response to this assignment, arrive at the conclusion that one value of the humanities and of this writing course for the student "is to enable him to express, to create, not the 'something extra' that's him, but the someone else, the someones else, he believes himself to be."[3] From such writing assignments that lead to the discovery of self and selves comes also the awareness of the self-creation that is involved each time words are put into sentences. Outward bound discoveries, certainly

Still another approach to self discovery is that of Robert Holland whose article "Piagetian Theory and the Design of Composing Assignments" offers a model of an assignment in terms of a developmental view of learning. It suggests that an assignment can through a series of questions locate a writer's point of control and then draw the writer on from a level at which he feels capable to more complex forms of thought and statement.[4] Such an assignment shows limits and it opens up possibilities. It suggests that cognitive growth and development require someone else to ask the questions that move you along, that there is a type of development that can only exist if someone else has designed it for you. I felt that this theory with its recognition of the role of others in providing the experiences that assist growth paralleled Hahn's views strongly--I was to return to it many times.

I decided to move on to the second Outward Bound goal--the extending of perspectives. This goal immediately brought to mind Young, Becker, and Pike's well-known heuristic in which a unit is looked at from particle, wave, and field perspectives and also is viewed as having contrast, variation, and distribution. It was not long before my writing assignments had taken a new turn. Witness the following:

Writing Assignment 4

> In Writing Assignment 3, we looked at a childhood experience and/or relationship and tried to get meaning from it by examining it from the particle, wave, and field perspectives.
>
> Now, let's use these perspectives again as we once more analyze meaning--this time in a word. Select a word from the writing that you did for Writing Assignment 3, one that you found necessary to your writing. First, examine the word at the particle level, giving denotations and connotations. Next, move to the wave level: What did this word mean to you at one time? How has the meaning changed for you as a result of your experience? And, finally, approach the word from the field level: What have been the observable effects for you of this change in the meaning of one word?
>
> Compose the first draft of a paper that examines the word you have selected from the perspectives indicated above.

This assignment, then, was my way of assisting my students to engage in self-discovery, in varying perspectives, and in more complex forms of thought and statement. We had begun.

It now seemed time to move to the third of the Outward Bound goals--the appreciation of choices. In the wilderness, choices are easily recognized as critical to the comfort, safety, and even survival of Outward Bound participants. These participants share the decision-making responsibilities for their group or watch--e.g., they map routes, navigate rivers, decide whether or not to proceed through fog. Instructors are trained to let decisions--right or wrong--stand whenever possible; should a decision made endanger the group, they are to wait as long as they can before stepping in. In the composition class there are also choices to be made, not so obvious and dramatic, perhaps, but still critical to the literary self. Who to sound like in a paper, which "I" to present to an audience, how to see an assignment, how to make from the assignment a point significant enough to base an essay on, how best to promote the sort of reader-writer

relationship that will result in cooperative activity--these are among the choices facing the composer of written meaning. Like their wilderness counterparts, writers' choices need not be right the first time. Indeed, an initial sense of inadequacy, a confrontation with one's own limits, is vital to both experiences. Revision is a natural outgrowth of an outward bound classroom, a necessary stage for writers re-examining conscious choices that they have made, in light of the possible failures that these choices have produced.

The question of how to get writers to see beyond their initial choices, how to get them to turn revision into more than just polishing the veneer of a first draft, led me to the fourth Outward Bound goal--the increasing of problem-solving ability. It also led me to Joseph Williams, who in "Cognitive Thinking, Cognitive Development and the Teaching of Writing" links the ability to solve a problem to the ability to distance oneself from it, to stand apart and develop an ironic stance toward it. "By seeing a system from a distance," he says, "we create the possibility of controlling rather than being controlled."[5] And, I thought, by seeing <u>ourselves</u> from a distance we become aware of our own limits and can take steps toward extending them. Williams would have writers gain control of their writing and of their revision by freeing themselves from unquestioning deference to rules and to authority, in particular, the authority they see vested in their own writing--in a topic sentence, in a first unrealized point, in a first draft. I see replacing these authorities, the authority of the outward bound program itself, with its risks, its challenges, its rewards. It is an authority that students would have to take on willingly if the program is to work. They must agree, after all, to have a try at being

their own person. This personal commitment, also, is part of Outward Bound.

The self-determining attitude toward authority that I have been discussing is echoed in many ways by Outward Bound. Basic to the Outward Bound experience is the belief that out of situations that progress from stress to temporary failure to success comes a special kind of self-esteem, self-reliance, self-respect. This attitude is what we are after for our students also, I think, and so we might borrow some Outward Bound methods to create it. This would mean writing assignments that fit into a planned sequence of tasks and challenges, inviting students on to ever higher levels of critical, analytic thinking. It would mean also that students would have failures along the way, inevitable and even desirable failures, for these failures would make the successes that followed special kinds of successes. There is a success that must be earned, a success for which failure --or a kind of incompetence--is a necessary condition. This is the success of Outward Bound.

Here is where the role of the instructor becomes especially critical. It is up to the instructor to foster the sort of classroom climate in which failures can become positive learning experiences. That these failures be anticipated and ungraded is as important as the attitude toward these failures that the students pick up from the instructor. If they don't feel that they can risk much in a first or second draft of a response to an assignment, they won't. If students don't feel that taking risks is a good thing or that they are safe with the teacher-peer responses to their writing, they will withdraw into the "safe" Engfish and themewriting that risks nothing and ventures nothing. What we are after, then, are the <u>planned</u> risks and <u>seeming</u> chaos of an outward bound learning situation, not an uncontrolled and uncontrollable situation that presents real threats to the

writer's self-esteem. Which situation writers find themselves in will depend on how well their instructors are able to educate themselves and their students in how to respond to what someone else has attempted. Sources that I have found valuable in illustrating the type of response that furthers intellectual growth, responsibility, and freedom are Knoblauch and Brannon's Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing and William Coles' books, The Plural I and Teaching Composing.[6]

The subject of peer responses led me into the fifth and last Outward Bound wilderness objective--concern for others. Outward Bound participants may arrive at base camp separately and as strangers, but this soon changes. Placed in "watches" of approximately twelve, they are given tasks to perform that cannot be done alone, that depend upon their trusting one another and functioning well as a group. As I have just shown, the outward bound writing class also depends upon a feeling of community, caring, concern, and responsibility in its members for one another. Corresponding to the "watches" described above are the small groups in which individuals have the opportunity to discover at least one more of the "selves" that constitute their "I." With no authority figure to rely on, no teacher to step in and rescue an aimless discussion or repair the damage done by an ill-chosen comment, the word "student" takes on new meaning. Group members have the opportunity to become subjects of the learning process not its objects, do-ers not those who are done to. If a group experience is successful, if a fellow student is helped to "see," it will be because of their efforts, both united and individually. If a group is faltering, if an individual is not carrying his share of the load, this, also, is their responsibility--both to diagnose and to correct. Thus, small group participation offers students a new way of looking at themselves both as learners and as people. And it offers teachers the opportunity to become what Carl Rogers calls

"facilitators," those who keep students company while they discover for themselves, rather than those who tell students what they think they should know. For a discussion of the small group approach to the teaching of writing, I suggest Thom Hawkins' article, "Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing." 7

So far in this serendipitous quest for the essence of outward bound writing instruction, the emphasis has been on what there is for the student in such an endeavor. And "what there is" seems to be self-discovery, expanded perspectives, increased problem-solving ability, appreciation of choices, and concern for others. But this is only half the story, I think. For instructors of such classes must also share in these gains, as well as in the challenge, the uncertainty, the teamwork, the self-doubt that accompany them. Any teacher who has composed the type of assignment--the type of classroom--that leads to these awarenesses knows well the self-searching and self-creation that go into the process. It is impossible to go through such an experience without being changed and perhaps becoming somewhat "outward bound" also.

And so, having reached the first plateau in my own outward bound experience, I can view more clearly the uneasiness that initiated it and the questions that gave rise to that uneasiness. I have, I think, some tentative answers to those questions. The first question of how to resolve the epistemic dilemma, I would answer by inviting writers to move from an exploration of their phenomenological world to an exploration of their knowing about this world. The key seems to be to keep the two approaches both separate and present so that the writer can see them as both distinct and connected. In answer to my distaste for such directives as "Be specific" and "Use concrete details," I see now that they have the ring of traditional,

teacher-imposed mandates and rules--a last-ditch attempt to have the writer produce mechanically the meaning that the assignment should provoke on its own. The question of which voice, which role to assume in my assignments cannot be answered by either of the choices I started with. The role of ever-sympathetic friend seems to make light of the very real learnings and challenges that I intend for my students; the role of bullying antagonist adds an element of threat where I wish none to be. My voice, my role, will emerge, I imagine, from my awareness that in many ways I am taking the same outward bound journey as my students, facing many of the same uncertainties as they. And for the final question of direction for my assignments, I think that I now know in what sense the words outward bound represent that direction. The goals that seem to have supported Kurt Hahn so well in his vision of what a learning experience should be and do work equally well in my vision of what a writing experience should be and do. And that vision, my vision, can perhaps best be illustrated by the following assignment:

Writing Assignment 5--Another Way of Seeing

> Henri Bergson, in Creative Evolution, states that what we see is unquestionably influenced by what we have seen, that each instant carries with it the perceptions of previous instants. Says Bergson, "My memory is there which conveys something of the past into the present. My mental state as it advances on the road of time is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing--rolling upon itself, as a snowball in the snow." Let's see if this has anything to do with our study of the ways in which meaning can change.
>
> In Writing Assignment 3, we saw that experiences change in meaning with the passage of time. In Writing Assignment 4, we saw that words also can change in meaning. And we saw that these changes can be significant to the way we see and live our lives.
>
> For Writing Assignment 5, I'd like you to examine still another change--this time in your attitude toward or way of

seeing someone or something important to your life.

First. Begin by describing for us how you once saw or felt toward the someone or something about whom or which you have had a change of attitude.

Second. Now describe for us your present way of seeing or feeling about _____ and tell us also what brought about this change in attitude.

Third. Let's see whether there is a third way of seeing _____, not the old way, not the new way, but instead a way that consists of both the old and the new, not blended together but apart, separate. Try describing for us now this third way of seeing _____. Show how this new way of seeing consists of both the old and the new--again, not combined but rather side by side.

Fourth. Let's suppose that an acquaintance has been looking over your shoulder as you wrote the three descriptions above. When you finished the third one, he said skeptically: "What's the good of that third way of seeing? And what's the good of knowing about it? Aren't you able to see without analyzing how you're doing it?"

Compose a response to this person's questions that will satisfy him--and you, also.

Here we have an assignment that, for me, moves toward the essence of outward bound writing instruction. It asks writers to engage in self-discovery, in problem solving, in shifting perspectives. It asks them to make important choices and to move from an exploration of their world into an exploration of their thinking and knowing. It asks them also to involve others in their journey. It invites them to say to someone else, "Come along with me on my journey outward. Let me show you the way, also." Fortunate, indeed, the writers who find such an assignment placed in a writing environment that renders "safe" the risks that the assignment may involve. For these writers--and for their instructors--there will be the challenges, the failures, the successes, the self-esteem, perhaps even the joy of an outward bound writing experience.

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Notes

1. William E. Coles, Jr., The Plural I (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), 157.

2. Coles, p. 230.

3. Coles, p. 238.

4. Robert M. Holland, "Piagetian Theory and the Design of Composing Assignments," Arizona English Bulletin, 19(1976), 17 - 23.

5. Joseph M. Williams, "Cognitive Thinking, Cognitive Development and the Teaching of Writing," paper read at the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, (1983).

6. C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, "Responding to Texts," Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing (New Jersey: Boynton/Cook, 1984), 118 - 150; William E. Coles, Jr., Teaching Composing (New Jersey: Hayden Book Co., 1974).

7. Thom Hawkins, Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1976).